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ABSTRACT

The goal of this research project was to create a guide on the effective use of assessment instruments and methodologies, related resources, and guidelines for measuring adult learners' attainment of basic skills and competencies to document educational gains and demonstrate program quality. The project focused on confirming current use of assessment in adult basic and literacy education (ABLE) programs and conducting focus groups to determine perceived barriers to using standardized assessments. Ongoing consultation with COSMOS Corporation (the project contractor) confirmed ABLE programs' current use of assessment instruments and methodologies. The project team conducted a literature review to develop supplemental information on recently published, commercially available assessments and on current assessment practices. This research also included conducting focus groups with ABLE practitioners to identify concerns and issues relating to assessment practices. Based on the research, project staff developed a basic guide to the effective use of standardized and informal assessments. (Focus group questions are appended.) (YLB)

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ED 407 544

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF ADULT LITERACY

Research on and Guidelines for Effective Use of Assessment Instruments and Strategies for Adult Learners Enrolled in Adult Basic and Literacy Education Programs

Final Report

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Research on and Guidelines for Effective Use of Assessment Instruments and Strategies for Adult Learners Enrolled in Adult Basic and Literacy Education Programs

Final Report

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ABSTRACT

Title: Research on and Guidelines for Effective Use of Assessment Instruments and Strategies for Adult Learners Enrolled in Adult Basic and Literacy Education Programs

Project No.: 98-6606 **Funding:** $37,470

Project Director: Eunice N. Askov **Phone No.:** (814) 863-3777

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Purpose: The Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy developed a basic guide to the effective use of assessments in ABLE programs. With Bureau approval, the originally planned statewide survey of ABLE programs' use of assessments was eliminated. Rather, the project focused on 1) confirming current use of assessments in ABLE programs and 2) conducting focus groups to determine perceived barriers to using standardized assessments. The resulting guide focused on using standardized assessments to enhance program accountability, using standardized and informal assessments to guide instruction and measure student learning, working with ESL adults and adults with learning difficulties, and establishing a supportive testing environment. Finally, the guide included references and a supplement, updating G. Jackson's *Measures for Adult Literacy Programs*. ABLE providers as well as professional development center staff should find the guide useful as general background information and for professional development purposes.

Procedures: Ongoing consultation with COSMOS Corporation (EQuAL Project contractor) confirmed ABLE programs' current use of assessment instruments and methodologies (Objective 1). The project team conducted a literature review to develop supplemental information on recently published, commercially available assessments and on current assessment practices (Objective 2). This research also included conducting focus groups comprised of ABLE practitioners to identify concerns and issues relating to assessment practices (Objective 3). Based on the research, project staff developed a basic guide to the effective use of standardized and informal assessments (Objective 4).

Summary of Findings: Research findings indicated that ABLE providers 1) generally do not believe that standardized assessments accurately measure student gains, 2) may not follow standardized test administration guidelines, and 3) generally do not use the results of standardized assessments but prefer informal instruments to guide instruction and measure progress. However, ABLE providers also expressed interest in guidelines for more accurately documenting learner progress. Reviewers concluded that the guide's structure and content were clear and that it would be useful for both new and experienced ABLE instructional staff.

Comments: The project's original objectives were modified after the contract was awarded. These modifications necessitated changes to the project narrative and budget but did not significantly affect the final project outcome.

Products: Assessment guide

Descriptors:

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Research on and Guidelines for Effective Use of Assessment Instruments and Strategies for Adult Learners Enrolled in ABLE Programs

Introduction

Purpose/Objectives

The Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy (College of Education, The Pennsylvania State University) proposed to build on previous research to develop a basic guide on the effective use of standardized assessment instruments and methodologies and on the collection and use of assessment data to place learners, guide instruction, and measure changes in adult learners' literacy skills. The guide, *Assessment and Adult Learners: Getting the Most From Standardized and Informal Assessment Instruments,* focuses on using standardized assessments to enhance program accountability, using standardized and informal assessments to guide instruction and measure student learning, working with English as a Second Language (ESL) adults and adult with learning difficulties and establishing a supportive testing environment. Finally, the guide includes references and a supplement updating G. Jackson's *Measures for Adult Literacy Programs.*

Time Frame

The project was conducted between July 1, 1995 and June 30, 1996.

Key Personnel

Co-Principal Investigators Eunice N. Askov and Barbara Van Horn, with the assistance of Shawn Jenkins (graduate assistant) and Priscilla Carman (project associate), conducted the research and developed the guide. *Dr. Askov* and *Ms. Van Horn* directed the research, drafted the guide, and conducted dissemination activities. *Ms. Van Horn* also communicated with COSMOS Corporation and reviewers; supervised collection and summary of data (information on newly identified instruments and focus group results);

collected and used evaluative data to revise drafts; coordinated dissemination efforts; and wrote the final report. *Ms. Carman* assisted Dr. Askov and Ms. Van Horn in designing and developing the guide. *Ms. Jenkins* assisted Ms. Van Horn in reviewing the literature for appropriate assessment instruments; contacting publishers for information on instruments; designing, conducting, and analyzing data from the focus groups; drafting segments of the guide; drafting the final report; and disseminating project results. A *transcriber* transcribed taped focus group data for analysis.

The *reviewers* assisted project staff by providing feedback on drafts of the guide, identifying additional source and resources, and assisting with scheduling focus groups. *Focus group participants* attended one-hour focus group meetings to answer the targeted questions.

Audience

ABLE providers should find the guide useful as general background on assessment and for selecting and using basic skills assessments to meet the needs of various stakeholders. *Administrators, counselors,* and *instructional staff* have a resource to 1) guide their selection of assessments to meet the needs of various stakeholders, 2) provide ideas for screening adults for learning disabilities and offering accommodations when assessing adults with learning difficulties, 3) provide strategies for using standardized and informal assessments to guide instruction and measure learning, and 4) inform decisions related to indicators of program quality. *Professional development center staff* have a resource that can contribute to local and regional training opportunities on learner assessment.

Dissemination

Permanent copies of this report and the guide (including a copy of G. Jackson's *Measures for Adult Literacy Programs*) are filed at the Bureau of Adult Basic and

Literacy Education and at the Commonwealth's two literacy resource centers and six professional development centers.

Addresses for the Bureau and literacy resource centers are:

1. Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education
   Market Street, 12th Floor
   Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

2. AdvancE
   Market Street, 11th Floor
   Harrisburg, PA 17126-0333

3. Western PA Adult Literacy Resource Center
   William Flynn Highway, Route 8
   Gibsonia, PA 15044-9644

Copies of the report and guide are also available through the Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy, Penn State University, 102 Rackley Building, University Park, PA 16802-3202.

Statement of the Problem

Traditionally, adult basic and literacy education (ABLE) programs have depended on the results of standardized, norm-referenced tests to determine changes in participants' basic skills levels and to report pre- and posttest data. The Bureau of ABLE (1994) encourages the use of standardized testing to conduct student assessments, reporting that 44% of Pennsylvania's ABLE providers use the *Tests of Adult Basic Education* — by far the most commonly used test. On the other hand, 46% of ABLE programs report using "other" assessments. The Bureau's 1994 report does not list these other assessments; however, it is expected that they include both less frequently used standardized instruments as well as alternative and informal assessments. Fluke (1991) reports, in fact, that many programs use standardized tests only to "provide a launching point for designing a plan for teaching".

Many adult educators are generally dissatisfied with the quality of information derived from standardized, norm-referenced tests and with the effects of these tests on both teaching and learning (Ehringhaus, 1991; Lytle, 1988). Dissatisfied with the traditional norm-referenced standardized tests, instructors have relied increasingly on alternative assessments as more realistic and reliable measures of learner progress. Programs have begun to explore the use of alternative — and often informal — assessments; however, it is unlikely that the Bureau of ABLE will eliminate the use of standardized testing in favor of alternative assessments. The Bureau's need to generate generalizable data on student progress that will encourage continued Federal and Commonwealth support for ABLE programs has increased dramatically in the past several years. Based on her direction of Pennsylvania's EQuAL Project, J. Alamprese (personal communication, August 8, 1995) reported that providers' inappropriate use of standardized instruments and subsequent collection of student progress data hamper the Commonwealth's efforts to support and enhance program accountability.

While others have compiled lists of commercially available ABE, GED, and ESL tests (e.g., Fluke, 1991; Jackson, 1990; Sticht, 1990), alternative assessment methodologies, such as portfolio assessment, have been mentioned only briefly, if at all. Today, the trend in student assessment appears to be toward supplementing standardized instruments with less structured alternative or informal assessment methods which hold particular promise for assessing adults with disabilities who may not perform well on standardized instruments. In response to instructors' growing interest in alternative assessments, various models have emerged (e.g., Fingeret, 1993; Lazar & Bean, 1993; Lytle & Wolfe, 1989). To date, however, compilation and evaluation of these alternative assessments or guidelines for effectively using the instruments and methodologies do not exist.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of the research was to create a guide on the effective use of assessment instruments and methodologies, related resources, and guidelines for measuring adult learners' attainment of basic skills and competencies to document educational gains and demonstrate program quality. The objectives of the project were:

1. To confirm current use of assessment instruments and methodologies used in ABLE programs through contact with COSMOS Corporation (as contractor responsible for the EQuAL project).
2. To research and develop a supplement to existing information (e.g., Jackson) on recently published assessments appropriate for learners enrolled in ABLE programs.
3. To conduct five focus groups comprised of representatives from programs serving adults enrolled in literacy, ABE, GED, and ESL programs, and adults with disabilities to identify concerns, interests, and/or barriers to using standardized, norm-referenced assessment instruments and methodologies.

4. To create a guide to the effective use of standardized, norm-referenced assessments that will support and enhance program accountability, including guidelines for using assessment results to guide instruction and measure student learning.

Procedures

The following section of the report details procedures used to meet the project objectives.

1: Confirm current ABLE program use of assessment instruments and methodologies.

Ms. Van Horn communicated with Ms. J. Alamprese, researcher with COSMOS Corporation and EQuAL project contractor, to identify standardized assessment instruments used in the EQuAL sites. This process updated Fluke's research (1991) on ABLE providers' use of various assessment instruments and drew project staff's attention to newly published instruments that could be included in the guide. It also informed development of the guide by highlighting the need to provide essential information concerning assessment procedures (e.g., importance of following standardized assessment guidelines to obtain valid data), basic information concerning the purposes for assessment, and suggestions for selecting and administering various types of assessment instruments.

2: Develop a supplement to existing information on recently published assessments.

Project staff conducted a comprehensive review of the research and practice literature to identify recently published assessment instruments and information on assessment methods currently used in adult education programs for adult basic education (ABE), general education development (GED), and English as a second language (ESL), including those for adults with disabilities. These searches included informational resources available in the Institute's library, Penn State's Pattee Library, and the state literacy resource centers. In addition, staff searched various databases including the

ERIC system and other electronically available resources (e.g., Gopher servers and World Wide Web). The Institute also queried relevant electronic discussion groups (i.e., listservs), such as the listservs sponsored by the National Institute for Literacy, for currently used assessment instruments and methods. Staff contacted adult educators conducting research and/or demonstrations of assessment strategies appropriate for adult learners (e.g., researchers and practitioners at the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, National Institute for Literacy, Literacy South, Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory) as well as publishers of adult education materials to identify alternative and/or non-commercial and commercial assessment instruments for adult literacy.

Project staff summarized essential information about methods and newly published assessment instruments. Summaries of assessment instruments included name; source of availability; publication date; administration requirements; and technical information including reliability, validity, and norming group (if applicable). These summaries, which added to test descriptions in Gregg Jackson's *Measures for Adult Literacy Programs*, were included as an appendix to the guide. A copy of Jackson's book was included with copies of the guide sent to Pennsylvania's professional development centers and state literacy resource centers.

3: Conduct focus groups.

Project staff developed focus group questions to determine ABLE providers' concerns about the effective use of standardized, norm-referenced basic skills assessments. Data from the focus groups assisted project staff in designing the guide to address these concerns and issues, presenting a strong rationale for using standardized assessments effectively for various purposes. This information also was useful in formulating recommendations for the effective use of various instruments and methods.

Focus Group Procedures

Ms. Jenkins drafted the focus group questions. Rather than asking the reviewers (members of the PAACE Board of Directors) as originally intended, Dr. Debra Wilcox Johnson (a colleague of Ms. Van Horn's with extensive experience in planning and conducting focus groups) agreed to review the draft questions and provide feedback.

Ms. Jenkins also contacted selected EQuAL site administrators and the reviewers and requested assistance in identifying and recruiting focus group participants. She mailed information concerning the project and the focus groups (e.g., focus group purpose and questions, informed consent documents explaining how data would be used). When potential focus group participants were identified, Ms. Jenkins contacted these individuals to schedule their participation in one of the five groups. Only three focus groups were conducted due to unusually severe winter weather. A total of 36 participants met in focus groups during January, 1996 (9 participants in Pittsburgh, 4 in Scranton, and 23 in Allentown) to explore assessment practices being used in Pennsylvania ABLE programs. These participants represented volunteer literacy, ABE, GED, ESL, and corrections and vocational education. They also represented various positions within ABLE programs: administrators, instructors, tutors, counselors, intake counselors, and test administrators. The groups responded to questions relating to types of tests, uses for tests, and testing preferences and concerns (See the Appendix for the list of focus group questions). Focus group discussions were audiotaped for later transcription.

Data Analysis and Findings

A transcriber, under the direction of project staff, transcribed the interview data from the audiotapes. Data analysis identified key issues and concerns about using standardized, norm-referenced basic skills assessments and methods. Ms. Jenkins used *Hyper Qual* software to facilitate coding and analysis of qualitative data. This process

allowed the comparison of data across focus groups to identify trends and strategies for designing the guide to address providers' concerns.

Data analysis revealed that providers were using assessments for various purposes. As expected, many different tests were being used; however, test administrators did not always adhere to the instructions for administering standardized instruments (e.g., ignoring time limits). Some of the tests that participants mentioned were standardized norm- or criterion-referenced instruments, developed for adults (e.g., ABLE, API, TABE, ALERT, BEST). Other assessments were curriculum-based assessments (e.g., *Number Power* and *Challenger*). However, several instruments were either designed and normed on children (e.g., *Botel Reading Inventory*, Spache) or were dated and out of print (e.g., *Thumbnail Diagnostic Placement Test*). Other measures generally were teacher-made, informal assessments appropriate for local program use. Many participants indicated that they depended on teacher intuition and informal methods such as portfolios to assess learner gains. The chart on the next page lists the assessments that focus group participants mentioned as commonly used in their programs.

Sample of Assessment Tools Used in Pennsylvania

Published Assessment Tools	Unpublished
1. Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE)	1. goal accomplishment lists
2. Adult Placement Indicator (API)	2. interest surveys
3. ALERT	3. journals
4. APTICOM	4. personal interviews
5. Basic English Skills Test (BEST)	5. portfolios
6. Botel Reading Inventory	6. progress reports
7. Brigance	7. questionnaires
8. Challenger Series tests	8. teacher-made tests
9. ESL Oral Assessment (ESLOA)	9. writing samples
10. Language Assessment Scales (LAS)	
11. McGrath Test of Reading Skills	**Other Measures**
12. Number Power	1. Career Compass
13. Scott-Foresman informal inventory	2. CDM (Career Decision Making)
14. Slosson Oral Reading Rest (SORT)	3. Harrington-O'Shay
15. Spache	4. Work Values Inventory
16. Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE)	5. LD screening
17. TABE Workplace Foundations	6. MELT levels
18. Thumbnail Diagnostic Placement Test	7. Self-Directed Search
19. Tutors of Literacy in the Commonwealth assessment (TLC)	8. Indicators of Program Quality (IPQ)

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Assessment procedures. Focus group participants expressed many viewpoints; however, common assessment procedures emerged. Most providers conduct multiple levels of testing as students enter their programs. Usually, program staff conduct an initial interview, including a questionnaire to determine past educational history and personal goals related to entering the program. It should be noted, however, that representatives from ESL programs stated that their ABLE programs' policies made it difficult, at best, to conduct effective initial testing. In these programs, many students with no or very little English proficiency are enrolled and assigned to a class. Instructors are expected to test these learners when they join the class. Unfortunately, these classes may be very large. As a result, instructors often do not have time to conduct even cursory screening, beginning instruction with no information on the adults' English proficiency levels. Also as part of the intake process, some students are screened for learning disabilities. Some participants indicated that disability screening was part of the intake process; others screened learners at a later time. Some programs did not conduct disability screening.

Following intake, providers generally follow two practices. In one case, staff administer a placement test to identify an approximate skill level so the student can be placed in an appropriate class. A more comprehensive standardized test is given later to determine an initial grade equivalent for administrative reporting requirements. In the second case, placement tests are not used. Program staff administer a comprehensive standardized test immediately, using test scores to place students. In some instances, a placement or locator test is given prior to the comprehensive test, but this is used only to determine which level of the test to administer.

After initial testing, various diagnostic assessments are used to determine an appropriate instructional plan. These assessments included both published and teacher-made tests. Reading, writing, and math skills are usually evaluated. Students in

vocational programs also are given vocational aptitude testing followed by goal planning based on the student's interests and abilities.

Schedules for posttesting varied widely. Some programs administered a posttest after 12 weeks of class, some after a predetermined number of contact hours, and others at the end of the program year. Providers often have students who could not be posttested because they had exited the program. Posttest results were used for program accountability and for measuring student progress.

Assessment issues. Several concerns about assessment arose in the discussions. Not all standardized tests were administered in accordance with recommended practice, thus invalidating the learners' scores. This usually referred to ignoring time limitations. Some providers related that students were allowed extra time, but they were only graded on the questions completed within the time allowances.

A second concern was testing logistics. In most cases, students were asked to complete many levels of testing. Some participants felt that it was burdensome and discouraging for students, while others felt students expected the testing and accepted it. Also, testing occasionally didn't seem feasible due to the large enrollment of students at one time (such as at the first meeting of an ESL class).

Some practitioners brought up a third concern. They questioned the need for specific testing or screening in some areas such as disabilities. Many practitioners felt that teacher intuition was particularly valid and was verified by test scores. Some practitioners felt that teacher intuition alone was sufficient to screen for potential disabilities or to place learners in appropriate instructional levels.

A final concern expressed by most participants was the role of alternative assessment practices. Many of the focus group participants felt that alternative assessment methods such as portfolios, writing samples, checklists, goal sheets, and journals provided a better picture of the student's ability than did standardized tests. The

participants saw the validity in using these assessment measures but acknowledged the need for providing data that can be generalized for accountability purposes. They felt the need to validate alternative assessment methods so that they would be acceptable to funding agencies for accountability.

4: Create a guide.

Project staff drafted a guide to include data collected and analyzed as part of the research conducted in *Objectives 2--3*. Efforts were made to address specific concerns that practitioners raised during the focus groups. For example, the guide addressed the importance of following instructions for administering standardized tests, the need for multiple assessments to meet various program objectives and information needs, the use of test accommodations for adults with learning difficulties, the use of assessment results to measure learner progress, and issues related to standardizing informal assessments.

Originally, reviewers were to be drawn from the Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education (PAACE) program directors. However, as the project developed, the Bureau suggested that reviewers be drawn from Project EQuAL sites. As a result, four reviewers with expertise in adult literacy, ABE, GED, ESL, family literacy, and workplace literacy were identified. These reviewers as well as several individuals who attended the 1996 Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE) conference session on the project read the draft, paying particular attention to their area(s) of expertise. EQuAL project staff also were helpful in reviewing drafts of the guide and providing feedback. Feedback from all reviewers was used to revise the draft. (See the Appendix for the review sheet.)

The guide provides an introduction to assessment methods and approaches appropriate for adult learners, defining purposes, types of assessments, and terms such as reliability and validity. Suggestions are included for selecting appropriate assessment instruments and providing a supportive testing environment. In addition, the guide

provides information on assessing adults with disabilities and those for whom English is a second language. The guide encourages ABLE providers to include adult learners in the assessment process, providing them with meaningful information about their progress. Finally, the guide will assist ABLE staff in using assessment results to guide instruction (placement and diagnosis) and to evaluate student learning. The appendix includes screening procedures designed by the National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities (NALLD) Center to identify adults with potential learning disabilities. It also includes summaries of identified assessment instruments, supplementing Jackson's (1990) book on assessments for adult learners. [A copy of the Jackson book was included with guides sent to Pennsylvania's professional development centers and literacy resource center.]

Objectives Met/Not Met

The Bureau's requested revisions to the project's plan required staff to refocus work from developing and conducting a statewide survey on assessment to designing and conducting focus groups. These procedural revisions were not finalized until September, 1996.

Objectives were satisfactorily met; however, most objectives experienced delays. For example, test publishers were not prompt in sending information about their assessments, particularly information related to reliability and validity. In some cases, information was never received. As a result, collecting and reviewing assessment instruments for inclusion in the supplement to Jackson's book (Objective 2) was hampered. In addition, project staff conducted only three of the originally planned focus groups (Objective 3) due to an unusually severe winter. On the other hand, over 20 individuals participated in the focus group in Allentown. As a result, project staff were still able to sample a representative cross-section of practitioners and administrators.

Evaluation Instruments/Techniques

Formative Evaluation and Recordkeeping

Formative evaluation allowed project staff to refine their approach to the project and respond to potential barriers; therefore, formative measures were included in each objective. *Project records* documented progress toward each objective and assisted staff in revising the projected activities as necessary. The formative evaluation plan included internal quality control measures and external review. Dr. Askov and Ms. Van Horn communicated to ensure that timelines were met — or adjusted realistically in response to barriers — for each objective.

1: Confirm current ABLE program use of assessment instruments and methodologies.

Project staff used information obtained from COSMOS Corporation to identify additional assessment instruments as well as issues and concerns identified by the EQuAL project about the use of standardized assessments. COSMOS' information also was validated against information obtained via the focus groups. This information, gathered throughout the project period, informed the development of the guide.

2: Develop a supplement to existing information on recently published assessments.

Soliciting input via electronic networks ensured that the literature review and search for newly published instruments was comprehensive. Project staff also used reviewers' suggestions to modify the supplement.

3: Conduct focus groups.

An expert on focus groups reviewed the draft focus questions; her suggestions were used for revisions. Staff review of the focus group participants indicated broad representation from various types of program providers. Data analysis revealed common concerns and issues that were subsequently addressed in the guide.

4: Create a guide.

External reviewers ensured that the guide was understandable and usable. Reviewers' written responses to the draft materials assisted the staff in revising the guide.

Summative Evaluation

Summative evaluation documents the project's effect on the targeted population. It is difficult to collect summative data in a 12-month project; however, project staff collected data from COABE conference participants as well as other individuals who reviewed the guide prior to the end of the project. These responses suggested that information in the guide would have a positive effect on practitioners' knowledge, understanding, and use of assessment instruments and methodologies. For example, one conference participant stated, "The idea that the results obtained from standardized tests are, in fact, valuable from a programming point of view and can provide information other than a grade level equivalent is encouraging. The do's and don't's section for the use of standardized tests is really relevant since, as evidenced by comments from the small group of participants in the discussion, the 'rules' do get abused or misconstrued." A reviewer added, "I think it's important for any educator to think seriously about how the kind of assessment relates to the purpose of that assessment."

Dissemination of Findings/Products

Pennsylvania's literacy resource centers received copies of the guide and final report. Professional staff development centers also were sent a copy of the guide; these copies included a copy of Jackson's (1990) publication on assessment instruments. The Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy also will distribute the guide at cost. Project information and results will be included in the May, 1997 issue of the Institute's *Mosaic: Research Notes on Literacy* (distributed nationally and internationally).

Project staff presented information about the research and guide at the annual conference of the Commission of Adult Basic Education (COABE) in Pittsburgh (May,

1996). Ms. Van Horn presented an overview on assessment based on the project at the Summer Institute: New Teacher Orientation (August, 1996) and was scheduled to conduct a session on assessment at the national conference of the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education (October, 1996).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The focus groups were useful in two ways. Participants assisted project staff by articulating current assessment practices as well as concerns and issues they have about assessment. They also identified some assessment tools that were listed as "other" in their programs' annual report to Pennsylvania's Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education.

Practitioners understood the need to document learner progress for accountability purposes but struggle to reconcile this need with the use of traditional standardized assessment instruments. For example, practitioners were concerned that data collected through standardized instruments does not adequately reflect learner progress. On the other hand, informal measures (e.g., portfolio assessment or locally developed instruments) did not provide the generalizable data needed for accountability purposes. These issues were mirrored in the literature review:

1) Practitioners' are increasingly interested in using informal learner-centered assessments as an alternative to standardized assessments for measuring learner progress.

2) Funders' challenge to ABLE programs for improved accountability (i.e., collecting generalizable data to document learner progress) is growing.

Focus group participants and reviewers representing adult literacy programs highlighted the difficulties in assessing adults with learning difficulties (documented or

undocumented). Providers estimated that up to 50% of adults enrolled in literacy programs exhibit learning difficulties (e.g., specific learning disabilities, developmental delays, mental health problems, attention deficit disorder, brain trauma). Historically, documenting learner progress based on standardized norm-referenced tests (e.g., TABE) for this population has been problematic. With the increased emphasis on collecting data that can be aggregated (usually via standardized, norm-referenced tests), adult literacy programs were struggling to identify assessment tools appropriate for this population.

Many ABLE instructors also requested information on using informal assessments: Are they valid? Are they reliable indicators of learner progress? Can informal instruments be standardized, thereby making data usable for accountability?

Finally, research conducted in this project highlighted the need for ongoing professional development for adult educators as to the purposes for assessment, selection of appropriate instruments for each purpose, and procedures for administering standardized tests and recording data. Professional development efforts also should assist ABLE instructors in linking assessment more closely with curriculum and instruction. Additionally, the research suggested that providers also would benefit from assistance on implementing program modifications to improve the testing environment. Adult learners often are not prepared either psychologically or academically for testing. On the other hand, some programs do not provide instructors with adequate information about learners' skills, hindering their ability to plan effective instruction.

Recommendations

1. Develop a series of professional development modules on assessment so that all ABLE practitioners become familiar with effective assessment strategies and procedures. It is essential that practitioners understand the importance of careful data collection and reporting for program evaluation and accountability since these practices affect both the individual program's quality as well as the state's ability to

attract federal funds to support local programs. Practitioners also need assistance in linking assessment to curriculum and instruction. The guide developed through this project should be included as part of these modules.

2. Encourage programs to establish clear, appropriate policies and procedures concerning effective assessment practices as well as annual plans for training/retraining staff on these policies and procedures. Appropriate procedures might include, for example, ensuring that all students complete an intake interview and, at minimum, initial screening prior to being assigned to a class (impact on quality of instruction). Policies might include, for example, requirements that guidelines for using standardized assessment tools be exactly followed and any variations documented and explained (impact on quality of data).

3. Research and design a process by which ABLE programs can report accurate and usable data on the progress of adults with learning difficulties.

4. In a related issue, explore avenues for identifying and validating indicators that practitioners find compelling proof of learner progress (e.g., items included in informal assessments) and ways to capture usable data for program accountability, particularly for adults with learning difficulties and adults for whom English is a second language.

Focus Group Questions

Warm up: Have participants introduce selves and briefly describe assessments they currently use in their programs.

1. What forms of assessment are most useful to you?
   - What qualities make them useful?

2. Several of you have mentioned the TABE and other standardized tests. How are these tests used in your program?
   - Changes in learners' literacy levels (pre- and post-tests)?
   - Diagnosis of learners' skills?
   - Placement?

3. What are your questions or concerns about the standardized assessments you've described?
   - How do learners respond?

4. How can standardized tests be used most effectively?

5. How can State and Federal program accountability requirements and instructional concerns both be satisfied?

6. What information about standardized tests would you like to know?

REVIEW QUERIES

Assessment and Adult Learners: Getting the Most from Standardized and Informal Assessment Instruments

This guide is expected to provide ABLE providers with basic, yet essential, information about the effective and appropriate uses of both standardized and informal assessment instruments. The Bureau expects that the guide will complement work being done through Project EQuAL and will provide a basis for professional development for ABLE staff in the area of adult assessment.

Please consider the following aspects of the content and format of the guide. *Please return your review comments to Barbara Van Horn via fax: 814-863-6108 or via the enclosed postage paid envelope. Thanks!*

Content

1. Based on the outline, is the scope of the guide adequate? If not, what would you add?

2. Is the sequence of information logical and clear? If not, what would you change?

3. Rough drafts of Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 are attached. Based on these drafts, is the information included sufficient? If not, what would you add?

4. Is too much information included? If so, what would you de-emphasize or delete?

Style and Format

Several Institute staff contributed to the enclosed draft chapters. Each has a particular style of writing, so the writing does not sound cohesive. Not to worry! We'll resolve this in the final version.

1. In general, are the chapters readable and accessible? Is the writing clear and straightforward? What do you like or dislike about the style/s of writing?

2. Formats for the chapters vary. What do you prefer: one column or two? single or double spaced? indent at the beginning of a paragraph or no indent (for single spaced format)?

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS? (Use the back of this sheet if you would like to tell us more!)